

FILE ONLY

REAGAN SEEN ASKING OPEN MILITARY AID FOR CONTRAS
BY ROBERT PARRY
WASHINGTON

President Reagan is expected to ask Congress soon for open military aid to Nicaraguan rebels, in an amount ranging from \$25 million to \$50 million, administration and congressional officials said Tuesday.

If approved, it would be the first open military aid that the United States has given the rebels fighting Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista government. The insurgents known as Contras received an estimated \$80 million in covert CIA assistance from 1981 to 1984.

"It would be tantamount to recognizing (the rebels) as a government in exile," said one well-placed congressional source.

The officials, who discussed the expected aid proposal on condition of anonymity, put the likely military aid request at from \$25 million to \$50 million, with additional funds anticipated for non-lethal assistance. Rebel leaders have been seeking as much as \$100 million.

Another source close to the administration said the White House had seriously considered the \$100 million figure and planned to renew a fight to lift a congressional ban on covert CIA funds for the Contras. That would allow larger amounts than the public aid to flow to the rebels.

Administration spokesmen said President Reagan had yet to give final approval to any aid plan, but added that chances for passage appear to be better than last year when Congress rejected lethal aid but granted \$27 million in "humanitarian" aid.

"On Capitol Hill, there's a bit of a shift of attitudes about the Sandinistas," said White House spokesman Edward Djerejian, citing congressional concern over Nicaraguan government crackdowns on civil liberties and its stockpile of Soviet weapons.

But one administration lobbyist said the White House was "more optimistic but ... not sanguine" about its chances of convincing the Democratic-controlled House to reverse its opposition to military aid for the rebels.

Another administration official said that to win approval of the lethal aid, the president "will have to weigh in heavily" in lobbying Congress.

The officials said the renewed aid package was prepared by an administration task force involving the National Security Council, State Department, the Pentagon and intelligence agencies.

Although contending that the rebel forces continued to grow during the cutoff of military aid, administration officials said the Sandinistas have hurt the Contras by employing Soviet-built Mi-24 helicopter gunships and other sophisticated weapons.

The Contras claim a combined force of more than 20,000 men but some U.S. officials have put the actual number of fighters at less than half that.

The rebels have also been harmed by continuing divisions within their ranks. The administration has funneled the non-lethal aid exclusively through the United Nicaraguan Opposition, an umbrella group dominated by the Honduran-based Nicaraguan Democratic Force, FDN, the largest U.S.-backed army.

A rival force, the Costa Rican-based Revolutionary Democratic Alliance, ARDE, led by former Sandinista commander Eden Pastora, has been denied any assistance.

One congressional aide, who asked not to be identified, said some moderate and conservative members of Congress might oppose any aid if the assistance is